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# The May-tree

527 The origin of the May-tree is explained by a charming
773 legend . . . When the apostles Philip and James were converting the Scythians and other pagan tribes, a devout virgin joined them and helped them to win over heathens to the true faith. Therefore the pagans slandered her badly and accused her of impurity. Hearing these accusations, the poor innocent virgin stuck her staff into the ground and, turning her face towards heaven, implored God to look upon her and give some sign proving her innocence. God heard her prayer, and lo ! green leaves and twigs shot out from the stick ! It is for this reason that at dawn on the two apostles day : on the first of May, the May-tree is set up. But Hungarian lads are not very likely to remember this. All they know about the May-tree is what their song says about it :

In front of my sweetheart's house
A tall tree has grown over night,
The wings of a soft wind
Wave a red kerchief in its branches . . .

527 The May-tree is a tall young tree ; its branches are
883 lopped off and only its crown is left, forming a green top. This leaf bouquet is decorated with ribbons and bright scarves. The tree does not grow by itself, as one is supposed to think according to the songs, but the lads set it up infront of the girls' houses. In some places, if the tree happens to be very small, it is stuck either onto the gate or onto the roof of the house. The Matyó lads have the custom to carry the tree as far as the gate ; but the girls set it up and decorate it. Here usually one or two bottles of wine find their way onto the tree ; in other places painted eggs are also hung upon it. As is the case with other customs, the date of setting up the May-tree has often been mixed

527 up with the habits of other important days. In some districts
783 it is set up at Easter.

May-trees are not distributed freely in every village. There are places in which only one common tree is set up in front of the church. In one village Whitsun habits have been mingled with the May-tree custom. On Whit-Monday the lads who set up the common May-tree accompany one of their number on horseback, who is covered with green leaves as is also his horse, to every house where there is a marriageable girl. Surrounding their leaf-covered companion in the middle of the courtyard, they ask for May-tree money, threatening that unless they get it, the horseman will gallop round the whole yard. This lad, clothed in green, reminds one of certain rain conjuring customs.

There exists that other custom as well, whereby the lads elect from amongst themselves a «sad king», who — like the Witsun queen — is not allowed to laugh while they make the round of the girls' houses. Just as at Easter, so now too they get presents. This «sad king» reminds one of the initiation ceremony of some primitive peoples... In a serious initiation the candidate must not show fright nor laugh at any joke.

527 As in customs connected with budding twigs in general,
[751] the May-tree may have had power to prevent illness and ward off evils, or it may have had a purifying effect in general. At least according to popular belief!

• [713] The May-tree set up in front of the church is a symbol of the restraining and ennobling tendency of the Christian religion. The first of May is the day of the apostles Philip and James. The tree set up in front of the church recalls the miracle of the stick of the virgin, who went with them. As for getting rid of evils, it is well known that Saint Philip freed the town of Phrygia from a terrible man-eating serpent: — «... While he prayed the terrible snake died and the town was released...»

527 As it is now in this game, so is it with real kings in
883 the case of primitive people, and so was it probably with the ancient Hungarian leaders. The king was sent asleep, but into eternal sleep, as perhaps the Hungarians did with their leader Álmos, who led them as far as this country. Álmos in Hungarian means «sleepy». According to simple people death is only a kind of sleep; children have the same notion.

• [773] The Hungarian peasant explains the election of the Whitsun king as «. . . the imitation of an old custom. Once upon a time the councillors of the country elected every year a new king on Whitsun's day; he was usually a shepherd boy. They gave him a sleeping draught, and they were wont to seat him on the throne in an unconscious state. But his power only lasted until the following Whitsun. Then he was put asleep in the same way and was sent back to his old place.»

In the case of many of the more primitive peoples real kingship is more or less a Whitsun kingdom — passing glory. It does not last until the king's life is over, in fact it ends when the people so decide, or when the king is conquered. Then he is set aside and a stronger man takes his place.

[881] A few of the old customs in use for the initiation of adolescents have found their way into the custom of Whitsun's kingdom. We have already referred to the fact that in one variation of the game a bridgeroom appears beside the queen, and that one ancient Hungarian royal marriage has also been mixed up in it.

883 Serious ancient customs or habits are thus turned in
857 the course of time into childish games, bearing faint marks
527 of old memories. A thousand years ago the Hungarians brought terrifying new war tactics into Europe, and pious Western friars added to their prayers: «From the arrows

252 required, and each person brings his or her own implement. They cannot turn up with any odd one in such a gathering, so each person brings proudly a decorated one, just as girls only take to the spinnery the distaffs which their lovers have so beautifully carved.

773 The great importance and distinction of bread makes it necessary that it shall be duly honoured when still in the form of wheat, all the more so as the Creator himself carved man's face on every ripe grain. According to a Legend, when God had turned man out of the Garden of Eden, he ordered him to search for the grain bearing his image, to grow it and work for it with the sweat of his brow, «because, although he had heard that it would mean death, he forgot and ate of the forbidden fruit».

788 The blessing of the wheat crop by the Church, which takes place on the day of Saint Mark, has therefore a great importance and meaning in Hungarian life. It is at the end of April, there is hope of life and the young crops are green like untouched promises. The people go in procession to the chosen wheat field where, under God's free sky, the future bread is blessed. Each person returns to his home with one ear from the field which has been blessed, — with a promise of new hope. It is blessed, so that fog shall not strangle, hail shall not destroy, storm shall not trample, fire shall not consume the only hope of the poor». Later on the Calvinists at their communion thank God with fresh bread for having watched the growth of the crops. In some districts ears picked from the blessed field are supposed to have a healing, increasing or magic effect, and therefore they are greatly esteemed.

241 But let us get down to work! It is Peter and Paul's
527 day, the stalk of the wheat is torn, and when the wind touches it, it undulates in golden waves. Poor people do the reaping themselves, helped by their family. Those